

TURNTABLES
AVID DIVA II

Play it again, Sam!

Has the digital era spoil us? Has the sheer convenience of the compact disc – its hour-plus playing time, its resistance to damage, its portability – and the vast range of CD playback hardware made the vinyl medium a mountain only true enthusiasts and nostalgics are prepared to climb?

Put it this way: the majority of mainstream consumers were only too happy to get rid of their scratched, cumbersome long-playing records when the CD came along – and especially when the economies of scale pushed prices down to truly affordable levels.

However, it is also true that the expected demise of the LP record never happened. And that the vinyl revival continues unabated. No, it's not a revolution, and the LP will never become a mainstream medium again. But vinyl is alive and well – and there is a steady stream of new hardware to support it.

Regular AVSA readers may recall my piece on the Avid Diva turntable, about two years

ago. That turntable represented an attempt by the British specialist turntable maker to bring its particular approach to turntable design within reach of a wider audience.

The Diva managed to exceed my expectations, both in terms of its robust engineering, and its sonic delivery. But I wasn't that enthusiastic about the assembly and set-up of the Diva, which was time-consuming and finicky, to put it mildly.

The team at Avid must have read my mind (and that of many others, I'm sure). Perhaps more tellingly, it became increasingly expensive to produce the Diva, which made it difficult to position, relative to the rest of the Avid range.

Which brings me to the Diva II. It's still very much an Avid product. But it is a damn sight easier to put together, and also to set up, which makes it much, much more convenient to use than the original.

And, between you and me, I think it sounds better, too – with the potential of even greater

performance with a couple of upgrades.

The Diva II has a simpler, arguably more elegant design than its forebear. The one-piece aluminium chassis is extremely rigid, providing a vitally inert platform for both the platter and the tonearm, while preventing relative movement between the two in the interests of accurate data retrieval.

The design philosophy adopted by Avid for the Diva II addresses the vibrations inevitably created by the stylus during playback by quickly and efficiently dissipating them through the main bearing through to main chassis, rather than attempting to absorb them with damping materials.

Also key is the high-quality main bearing, made up of sapphire, tungsten carbide and stainless steel, and designed specifically to drain vibrations to the main chassis, while offering exceptionally smooth, quiet running characteristics.

A standard record clamp rigidly fixes the record to the platter and, by implication,



VITAL STATS

Motor	AC synchronous, 24 Volt, separate control unit
Drive	Belt
Platter	MDF outer, alloy drive hub.
Bearing	Inverted stainless steel, sapphire/tungsten carbide thrust point
Suspension	Three-point sorbothane-cushioned damping
Tonearm	Jelco SA-250ST
Dimensions	380 x 340 mm footprint, 140 mm high
Weight	9,0 kg
PRICE	R22 000

VERDICT

Who said vinyl was staid, old-fashioned and noisy? Avid's Diva II eclipses the original in most key areas, and delivers the kind of musicality and emotion few CD players can match. Impressively engineered, and user-friendly too.

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the bearing itself, again contributing to the close, accurate dialogue between platter and tonearm.

Of course, such rigid coupling demands extremely efficient isolation from external vibrations, an aspect addressed on the first Diva with an intricate suspended arrangement of elastic bands. Instead, the Diva II employs a sorbothane-based, three-stage passive damping system to absorb external mechanical interference.

As before, the AC synchronous motor is housed separately in a heavy steel enclosure, which means it cannot transfer noise or vibration to the chassis. The heavy mass of the motor assembly ensures accurately sustained rotational speeds, while the customary belt drive adds further isolation.

Speed can be set by altering the position of the motor, while the stepped spindle allows switching between 33,3 and 45 rpm. The power supply is housed separately, and includes a rotary on/off switch.

Set-up was quick and straightforward, with the biggest challenge being undoing the intricate packaging. In fact, I don't know if I will ever get all the pieces to fit back into one piece ... But once all the bits were laid out on the table, it took about 10 minutes to get the whole deck up and running.

As reviewed here, the Avid Diva II is supplied with a Jelco tonearm sourced from Japan. The straight, lightweight design is nicely put together and a very good match for the Avid. Again, it's also easy to set up, and gets along with most quality MM and MC cartridges in the 4 to 10 g range.

The Jelco has a 228 mm effective length, and features a unipivot bearing, with dial-in anti-skating and a rotating counterweight that turned out to be fairly accurately calibrated. The headshell is integrated, and the arm is equipped with one-piece internal wiring.

I ran the Diva II/Jelco combination with a whole variety of cartridges, including the rather excellent, moving-magnet Ortofon 2M Red, a Benz Micro L2 Wood, and my regular Ortofon Kontrapunkt B moving-coil unit.

The pile of records used for the Avid seemed to get higher and higher as the weeks spent in the company of the turntable

stretched into months.

You see, the Diva II captured my attention from the very first note of Pink Floyd's 'The Wall', and never let go, regardless of the number of LPs I mounted on its platter and played.

From the rousing rock of Led Zeppelin and Uriah Heep to the delicate vocals of Carol Kidd, from the soaring guitar of Eric Clapton to the stirring strains of Jennifer Warnes' 'Famous Blue Raincoat', the Diva II found an empathy with the music that allowed it to deliver its sonic wares with compelling assurance.

The delivery was not only rich in musical content, but managed to translate the emotional impetus of the performances. It was like meeting old friends after an extended absence: even discs I thought I knew really well sounded fresh and revitalised, with more substance and tonal subtlety than I remembered.

The music had a 'walk-in' quality, with a very strong, very believable sense of dimension and depth. The imaging was soaked in realism, with

plenty of fine detail to act as spatial and tonal pointers, with the result that my compact listening room seemed to expand under the sheer force of the delivery.

The music assumed scale and authority, with a presence that made the listening experience a riveting and addictive one. The black silences, and impressively low noise floor, did much to add vital contrast and colour to the overall sound, while also confirming the class and impressive engineering credentials of the Avid.

I found the Benz Micro a particularly suitable companion for the Jelco/Avid combination, thanks to its rich and tangible treatment of textures and tonal hues. As a result, the sound achieved by this wood-bodied cartridge had a special charisma that suited the sonic stance of the Avid to a tee.

The Kontrapunkt B was cleaner and more critical, with an arguably finer resolution and a closer attention to those elusive, fine details. But some of the tonal richness and tactile appeal of the music was lost, and the sound was less approachable on some recordings.

The 2M Red was also a good match for the Avid. It didn't have quite the finesse nor dynamics of the Kontrapunkt, but performed with a smooth and composed elegance. Staging was a little less effusive, but still generous and focussed, though.

As much as I really enjoyed the Diva II/Jelco as reviewed here, I am convinced that the deck will fare even better with an upgraded arm. Rega's RB300 would be an obvious choice, or even better, the SME 309. But, of course, the latter would push up the price substantially.

Thus, in outright value terms, the Avid Diva II is hard to beat at its price point. Very few record decks can muster this level of cohesion, dynamic excitement and emotional content for the money. And with such a good initial platform, upgrades to both tonearm and cartridge could reap handsome future dividends.

Which brings me back to that packaging. Even with the colour images in the manual, there's no way I'm getting the Diva II to fit back into the box. Which means I have no choice but to keep it. Let's hope the cheque doesn't bounce!

Deon Schoeman